

## The Crisis of 'Self' in *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

The article titled 'Crisis of 'Self' in 'Midnight's Children' and 'The God of Small Things' is the study of the fate of 'self' in the face of harsh and hostile modern world. Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are post-modernist novelists too much preoccupied with the emptiness and meaninglessness of human life and situations. They communicate this world-vision mainly by juxtaposing the individuality or 'self' of the characters vis. a vis. the society. In their works we come across a host of characters striving hard to come in terms with the hostile situations around them. Both society and self are interdependent. A person finds fulfillment in society. However, society while getting institutionalized is thrusting its dictates on 'self'. This confrontation of self and society is leaving all the values shattered and all the ideals vanished. 'Midnight's Children' and 'The God of Small Things' presents the same predicament of modern life. The characters in the novels face persons, institutions and relationship of a decayed and degenerated social order. Thus estrangement and alienation is the normal course of affairs. The characters are alienated not only from the society and its institutions but also from themselves. Fluidity is all encompassing atmosphere leading to confusion and resentment. In such an ambiguous situation remaining a normal being and sustaining natural relationships is totally impossible. Thus the characters have fluid and multiple identities. They are rootless persons turned aimless due to the trauma and travail they have to pass through in the world full of grotesque incongruities. It is at this point that the life-stream infused in an individual is thus systematically cut-off. All his strength, will-power and even his purpose of being alive die out. This is the dehumanization of a human-being turning him virtually into 'death in life' image.

**Keywords:** Post-Modernist, Emptiness, Meaninglessness, Estrangement, Alienation, Fluidity, Multiple-Identity, Grotesque Incongruity, Dehumanization

### INTRODUCTION

A novelist interprets life through its representation. He exhibits events, characters and much else under such perspective as is indicative of his overall world-view or life vision. The self-society antagonism has been the key-constituent of this life-vision since time immemorial. Writers have been delineating the fate of an individual at the face of the belligerent universe since the inception of literature itself. However their presentations differ from time to time as per the perspective of individual writers. The post-modernist writers such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are socially conscious writers concerned with the real state of affairs of man and his situations. The thematic design of *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* is woven around this idea of self-society interaction. A historical approach will help us understand this aspect of the two novelists' preoccupation.

### BACKGROUND

Both in their vision of man and society and the historical condition they portray, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are akin to such French novelists as Balzac and Flaubert. In their time their country was in the phase of 'swinishness', as Flaubert put it. The heroic age of the French Revolution and Napoleon the great was followed by a diminutive period marked by degeneration, disillusionment and vulgarity. Rushdie and Roy write of such an age following the period of Independence Movement of India. The rosy idealism of Indian independence movement stood shattered at the face of coarse reality. It was the time of shattering of illusions. The grand objective of independence is not fulfilled creating a chaos and confusion in society. The writers and artists are observing with anguish this denigration of ideas and corruption of

values. The novelists find it difficult to identify themselves with such a situation.

The writers coming after achievement of independence indicate and project in their works characteristically critical and adverse intimation of modern life, stressing the disillusionment and estrangement and even modish expatriation of Indian intellectuals [...] (they) reflected the futility of the sterile, ambiguous and confusing heritage of eroded past as well as the horror and boredom and malaise of the unaccommodated present. (Raghvacharyulu 35)

The fact that India achieved a fractured freedom dividing not only regions but also the heart and souls of people – has also to contribute in making of this new life- vision. In the social arena also, the same disintegration is visible.

The novels of these writers are the product of a transitional phase when an individual's organic ties with his family and also with the society are breaking up. The society is getting increasingly institutionalized where the interests of an institution appear in confrontation with those of an individual. The institutions are stubbornly thrusting their dictates on the individual. There is antagonism between sexes. The generation gap is increasing and the self is getting imprisoned in its own cobweb. It is in this context these novels have "turned introspective and an individual's quest for personal meaning in life has become a theme of urgent interest (Mukherjee 204). However, in more mature works this personal quest is done in the context of larger national and social issues.

## DISCUSSION

The *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* display a profound revelation of such currents of the society and the fate of people living therein. This vision is of man facing a particular phase of human history marked by multiple and fluid identities of people shorn of their roots and values. It is a period of anger, revolt and turbulence.

Life is fury. Fury, Oedipal, political, magical, brutal-drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths. This is what we are. What we civilize ourselves to disguise the terrifying human animal in us, the exalted, transcendent, self-destructive, un-trammeled lord of creation. We raise each other to the heights of joy. We tear each other limb from bloody limb (Rushdie *Fury* 30-31).

This is the picture of a world in which individuals are alienated and estranged from the society they live in. The picture of such a world has most profoundly been given by the great existentialist writers Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. The existentialist view of man is that of emptiness and meaninglessness. As Sartre says, "Man is a useless passion. It is meaninglessness that we are born, it is meaninglessness that we die" (Roubiczec 125). Sartre's life-long companion and herself a great writer, Simone de Beauvoir says, "I experience in myself the emptiness that is myself" (Roubiczec 125). The most crucial task facing man is that he must make himself and give meaning to his otherwise meaningless life. The novels like *Midnight's Children* have a distinctively existential dimension. It has pre-eminent theme of identity and the plight of 'self' in a hostile world. "The numerous ways in which identity is made to suffer is vividly illustrated in the experiences of the protagonist. Identity is in turn shown as sham, as mistaken and confused, subjected to oblivion, fractured, dwarfed and reduced to animal level, as barren, sterile and totally lost" (Naik and Narayan 39).

In *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* alienation and estrangement are the basic condition of man's existence on earth. Man is not just estranged from society and its institutions but he is estranged even from himself. Everyone must be competent enough to chart out ones' own meaningful way of life. But has one such competency? The historical condition in which one is born incessantly throws obstacles at each step. The characters face persons, institutions and relationship of a decayed and degenerated social-order. Here self and society are working at cross purposes.

These novels picture a society in which all lines separating good from evil, right from wrong and live from spurious relationships have been blotted out. Fluidity is all-encompassing atmosphere. Here fortuitous and fruitful interactions between self and society are impossible. The interactions are of the type where opposing sides fight a war to be the victor. The positions of people including the situation of the society, the nation or the world at large are ad interim waiting to be changed and re-changed indefinitely. In Prof. Gokak's view the Indo-Aglian Literature is the transmutation of the Indian sensibility with its inborn sensitiveness of seeking "unity in all seeming contradictory things" (Gokak 178). In *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* this quality is very much visible but not in the laudatory ways visualized by him. Here all values or pretensions masquerading as values are subjected to genial satire and irony that does not exclude idealized idols as 'Tryst with Destiny' speech whose recent variations are 'Shining India' and 'Incredible India.'

The world of *Midnight's Children* is all fragments. All cohesion, social or otherwise, has gone as it must in midst of aggressive self-seeking and frightening antagonism at each step. The ambiguous and confused heritage marked by atavistic and feudal vestiges fails to blend with equally confused and amorphous present. *Midnight's Children* are all unattended waifs. In *The God of Small Things* the creeping corruption at each point in the Nation's life seems past-redemption. Family and other social and other institutions have lost their luster and are in the process of worst possible degeneration and even dissolution. Children lose innocence and get soaked in ways of the devalued adult world. They become the victim of personal and collective whims and freaks of persons and organizations. Their milieu is such that they fail to be normal persons and so have no capacity to form and sustain normal relationships. "That something happened, when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine on the vast, violent, circling, driving ridiculous, insane, unfeasible public turmoil of a nation" (*The God of Small Things* 19).

The dehumanizing process is very well seen in Estha who from being sullen and tense comes to a stage when he "stopped talking altogether" and in a viable age of thirty-one becomes totally quiet man with "sea-secrets in the eyes" (*GST* 92). The inner turmoil and meaninglessness of Rahel's life is reflected in the emptiness of her eyes that offends her American husband and eventually they are divorced.

*The God of Small Things* is the tragic tale of Esthappan Yako and Rahel, "the two egg twins [...] physically separate but with joint identities" (*GST* 2). They are naïve children, untouched by the corruption of adult world. Theirs is an exalted horizon in which the whole cosmos is an extension of their own being. They love everyone and think themselves being loved by everyone.

However society and its institutions do not let them remain so forever. They are separated from each other at the tender age of seven as people say, "together they were trouble, *natas ni rieght seye*" (*GST* 302) or to put in the right order "Satan in their eyes". They are made responsible for the death of Sophie Mol. They suffer from the sense of guilt for the torture and brutal killing of their beloved friend Velutha at the hands of police and subsequent suffering and death of their own mother.

Velutha's undeserved sufferings and death mostly result from the fact that he is an untouchable. His humiliation in society is seen when he presents his gifts to Ammu and she manages to take them without getting touched by him. Family the greatest base of Indian social life is breaking up as much by its inherent weakness as by the burden of aggressive self-assertion plus the wind of permissiveness blowing everywhere. People, especially the exploited ones are fast becoming commodities and are used as merchandise for profit. Persons with full and rounded personality are making room for split and undeveloped personalities full of aberrations and complexes. A telling incident is of Estha's being seduced by a maniac in the Abhilas Talkies.

He got a cold bottle and straw. So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny [...] The orangedrink lemondrink Man's hand closed over Estha's [...] He moved Estha's hand up and down. First Slowly. Then fastly (GST 103).

And the trauma of a sensitive boy of seven can easily be imagined:

Estha alone walked weavily to the bath-rooms. He vomited a clear, bitter lemony, sparkling fizzy liquid. The acrid after-taste of a littleman's first encounter with fear (GST 119).

Persons like Estha, made to pass through travails and trauma, lose all strength and will-power. They drift aimlessly falling victim to the sinister forces let loose all rungs of society. They are cast in the Death-in-Life image shorn of all vitality and exuberance to live. Lapses of Estha and Rahel can't be called to be product of their will as society has not allowed them to form a will or personality. If they are amoral their society is more so. So Rahel and Estha are tragic figures like Oedipus, the hero of Sophocles' great tragedy *Oedipus the King*. Like him they are the victims of society that has betrayed them. Destitute families mutilate their own children to make them more profitable beggars. Greater crimes under cover go undetected. Yet society gets more and more morality conscious.

*Midnight's Children* moves at more grandiose levels. The grand destiny of the great Nation is reflected in that of Midnight children, the children born at the midnight hour of August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. The chief protagonist Saleem Sinai finds himself "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (*Midnight's Children* 3). The texture of this novel is allusive, complex and inclusive dense with symbolic, even emblematic overtones. Multiple identities and shifting shapes of people, things and institutions are vividly depicted epitomized at the stage where the two most important characters Saleem and Shiva become indistinguishable. Even national frontiers and nationalities get blurred. Xenophobic pride like dark mist is cover over realities. It is the composite picture of India where all distinctions of races, communities, classes, regions and religions become non-existent, one qualifying and affecting other. There are missed and mixed identities. It is a cobweb of so many contradictory and complementary forces at work, bringing out the dual fate of man. Even during the Great Midnight hour when Great Destiny beckons to India normal failures and infirmities are visible. So are mistakes, trickery and irresponsibility. Saleem Sinai the supposed son of Ahmed and Amina is legally the son of poor singer Wee Willie Winkie though reality is still unclear. The singer's wife Vanita had an illicit relation with an English land-lord, William Methwold. The midwife Mary Pereira somehow changed the name tags of Vanita and Amina's babies and thus he became an offspring of Sinai household.

Such diminutive details are all pervading in the novels that puncture the high-flown idealistic pretensions to which mankind and the world are subject. Rushdie burlesques historical names giving comic slighting effect to high-flying idealism, thus bringing the focus on the mud and froth of real existence. He also gives touches of genial satire on superstitious practices in the belief of astrology and other esoteric devices. At the age of nine Saleem discovers his extraordinary telepathic powers enabling him to read the mind of people around him. At ten he begins communicating with 581 children who are the survivors from 1001 children born at the Great Midnight. These are the midnight children, who "through some freak of biology or perhaps, owing to some preternatural power of moment" (MC 234) each of the child is endowed with special talents.

The fact that 420 midnight children have died so early is another anti-idealistic thrust. Most such depictions have allegorical or slighting effects. Authentic Indian flavour is given to the story by esoteric ironic details. Saleem having the power to look into men's hearts and minds organize midnight telepathic conferences with midnight children night after night. Shiva has the gift of war. A slum girl from Delhi, Parvati the witch has the power of conjuration and sorcery. There

is rivalry and downright hostility between midnight children especially between Saleem and Shiva one jealous of the other. This leads to loss of their special powers save Saleem's new power of smelling things and events. This power he got during the operation of his nasal deformity. And so on and so forth. All these points at the lingering atavistic, astrological and superstitious disposition in Indians and India being projected as a top modern state with all modern values pervaded with scientific temper.

Midnight had many children; the offspring of independence were not all humans. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and peepers [ ... ] I had to go on exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than- even I had dreamed. (MC 350)

Saleem Sinai the wise, brave and dashing protagonist in the *Midnight's Children* is witness to most of crucial events that took place in the subcontinent from the birth of Independent India to Military Rule in Pakistan, the birth of Bangladesh and Emergency in India. Above all, he is the witness to the degeneration of the Nation. He has been in pain and anguish at the degeneration of Nation through the doings and undoings of power-hungry, corrupt and inept politicians. The high hopes spelt out at the Great Midnight have been belied. Like Saleem himself Independent India has prematurely become aged, impotent mutilated with ominous cracks all through her body. The potentiality of the magical midnight's children has been systematically cut out and the land is reeling under darkness with only a faint hope of regeneration.

Saleem Sinai is a wonderful creation in the world of fiction. His state is linked with that of his nation. He shares the enthusiasm and idealism of his people. But his self has moments of cool detachment when he sees the realities as they are as much as the national caste and communal frenzies as the illusion of 'Chini-Hindi-Bhai-Bhai.' Getting wiser through experiences he becomes disillusioned with the goings-on in his country. He casts away the shreds of idealism and rosy dreams. He often goes in exile-sometime to the 'land of pure' (Pakistan) and sometime to Bangladesh. He thus muses on complex realities of human conditions:

...until the thousand and one midnight's have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their time, to forsake privacy and be sucked into annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes and to be unable to live or die in peace. (MC 552)

Literature is, as F.R. Leavis has said, "an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature" (Leavis 460). Thus humdrum realities of surface happenings have to be associated with external realities of human nature and terrestrial existence. Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are remarkable creative writers. Whatever their avowed concerns and preoccupations in their work they approximate the role of creative writers who speak of things that appear to expand into something boundless. In the novels of other kindred novelists like Naipaul, Vikram Seth and Kiran Desai the sequence of events constituting their artistic vision emanates from the characters in conjunction with forces at work. In *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* the author's points of view condition everything. Their characters appear anemic and mouthpieces of ideas and views. The characters play calculated roles and elements of real surprise and mystery are lacking.

In great work of literature there are oblique references to realities beyond realities that not only electrify the fictional world but also define the surface realities giving them extra dimension of expansion and depth. To take just one example, Dostoevsky is a staunch realist but "the images he calls up are more real than life and his visions have outlasted the lives of generations of men" (Ford 773).

The diminutive characters of *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* are in keeping with the fictional world that they create. Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy project their life-

vision through real pictures of people, places and events that have the tinge of authenticity. There is the portrayal of both the 'boredom' and 'horror of modern situations. The 'glory' is of course missing. However, in the cumbersome situations we live in, glory of life is not easy to be felt. It is implied in the situations itself. It is not that the fictional world of Rushdie and Roy is shorn of positives. The positive values are very much there. They are implicit in the clash of events, ideas and point of view. The diminutive world is run by diminutive people at the helm. In great work of literature own from Homer, Vergil and Valmiki to the artists of our times salvation to people and society has come through heroes with magnanimous personality and deep commitment to the well-being of people. In the absence of such leaders that the world is what it is. Salman Rushdie makes clear allusion to this state of affairs:

Clowns! Burlesque, buffoons, drafted into history's theatre on account of the lack of greater men. Once, indeed, there were giants on our stage. Madam history must make do with what she can get. Jawaharlal, in these latter days, was just the name of stuffed dog (Rushdie *The Moor's Last Sigh* 352).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, as creative writes, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are quite impressive in delineating the fate of man vis. a vis. the institutions made by him . Both the writers follow the ironic detached line of R.K. Narayan. There is no self-idolization or self pity in their portrayal. In their effectively delineated fictional picture we find the blurring identities of people, their relationships and their institutions in a world full of grotesque incongruities. They are the chroniclers of alienation and estrangement, the most marked features of our age. Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* and Rahel and Esthappan in *The God of Small Things* are archetypal modern figures on eternal search, seeking age old certainties of family, neighbourhood, community and nationhood. In this way the search of self in these novels is both an aesthetic machinery to look into the larger issues of life and also the real state of real man in the society.

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

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**Citation:** Dr. Sujata (2015) The Crisis of 'Self' in Midnight's Children and The God of Small Things. IJSELL 3(5), pp: 56-62.